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ABSTRACT

Within the last few years English curriculum, especially at the introductory levels, has changed so that reading and the study of literature is integrated with the learning of writing skills. Consequently, English teachers need to consider the best way to merge the two skills by drawing upon the findings of psychologists and cognition theorists to plan appropriate classroom activities. Journal-writing and small group discussions in composition and literature classes have been successful methods for merging the skills of reading, discussing, and writing. Students not only learn the commonalities of reading and writing skills but get actively involved with the text being studied through: (1) independent reading, thinking, and writing about ideas presented in literature; (2) sharing of those ideas in small and then in large groups; (3) reevaluating those ideas in after-class journal entries; and (4) articulating those ideas in formal writing assignments, papers or exams. (MHC)

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INTEGRATING READING, WRITING, AND LEARNING THEORY:

A METHOD TO OUR MADNESS

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Integrating Reading, Writing, and Learning Theory: A Method to Our Madness

Within the last few years, we have begun to see a change in the English curriculum, especially at the introductory levels, wherein the reading and study of literature is integrated with the learning of composition and writing skills. Whether we are simply returning to the "old" system or beginning something new is irrelevant; what is important is that we have begun to merge the findings of reading theorists with the admonitions of composition theorists in a planned fashion. In other words, we have made the conscious choice to teach simultaneously writing and reading skills as closely related aspects of communication and response.

Now it seems that we need to consider the best way to merge the two skills and consider ways in which the findings of psychologists and cognition theorists can help the English teacher to plan classroom activities that will help meet the needs of students with varient learning skills in order to help them to see the relationship between the reading of literature and the writing of papers which communicate their sometimes nebulous ideas. In this paper, by drawing upon the findings of reading theorists and writing theorists, I will show how I have successfully integrated the study of literature and the acquisition of writing skills by using student-centered activities, based upon some ideas of cognitive theorists.

A few semesters ago, after a rather dismal attempt at teaching a required freshman course which combined composition and literature, I decided to alter my approach, to emphasize what theorists have termed a student-centered classroom. I didn't change the number of writing assignments, I didn't change

the reading list, I didn't change my grading standards or expectations. The only two changes I made were to assign a journal and to implement small-group discussions. The result was one of my most rewarding teaching experiences. Students wrote daily about literature, they talked and argued about literature, they even acted out literary texts. I had stumbled upon an approach which met my students' needs in helping them become engaged in their own learning. As a result my classroom was radically different even though my students were basically the same as those I had taught before--with less gratifying results.

Then, as so often happens, I discovered why. At a pre-conference workshop conducted by Gerald Osborne and Colleen Hester, I discovered that the principles of type concepts and teaching styles developed by Gordon Lawrence indicated that the teaching styles of most instructors are based on their own learning styles as students. Significantly, the learning styles of most of today's students are completely opposite of those of most teachers. For example, many English teachers are by nature introverted, while most undergraduate students are extraverted. When these learning styles clash, an unspoken, perhaps unconscious, antagonism may impede learning. In other words, the teacher-student relationship is primary for student involvement in learning.

Since most of us, having read articles in CCC, College English, and other journals, are familiar with the importance of integrating reading and writing, I will summarize very briefly. Then, I will point out some salient points about the learning styles of our students and, finally, I will suggest one method of integrating all of this theory in course assignments.

It is a commonplace that reading and writing involve the same kinds of acts: In order to write well, one must also be able to read well, to identify the cues and the techniques that make an essay, a piece of fiction, a poem

"work." Whether we are engaged in reading or in writing, the function of language remains constant--to make meaning. The psycholinguistic view of language suggests that our instruction should emphasize the commonalities of these activities, which all too often our students see as discrete processes. Joseph Comprone, for example, says that when we combine these activities, "reading is as much an act of composing as writing" (124). Reader response theorists, such as Anthony Petrosky and David Bleich, support the idea that because reading and writing is a recursive activity, they must be approached jointly. Martin Farber says, "A phenomenological description deals with what is given in experience as such, with experiences just as they are in themselves. The aim is to bring to evident consciousness the essence of that which is experienced" (44). And Wolfgang Iser claims, "The phenomenological theory of art lays full stress on the idea that, in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text. . . . The convergence of the text and the reader brings the literary work into existence" (274-75). Those of us who teach composition through the process approach realize the inter-relationship; otherwise, we would not sharpen our students' critical and analytical skills through peer-reponse workshops on drafts. In most cases, of course, these workshops consist of reading each other's papers, talking about that text, and then revising the text--all aspects of the communications triangle.

The point that I want to make here is that we may do this in all of our classrooms--in "straight" composition courses, in literature and composition courses, and in "straight" literature courses--by combining the skills of reading, discussing, and writing. The problem which some of us may encounter (I know that I did) is how to get our students involved in the text, be it a

work of literature or a student essay. One of the reasons for the problem concerns today's students' learning styles, which are often radically opposed to our own. So, I went to a pre-conference workshop on using a learning styles paradigm to enhance teaching and learning. The workshop was based on Gordon Lawrence's People Types and Tiger Stripes, a Practical Guide to Learning Styles.

After completing the Myers'Briggs Type Indicator, I discovered that I am an I-N type person. By the way, most of today's college teachers are I-N personalities. That is, I (or we) look inward for resources and cues, have fewer interests which are pursued deeply, are reflective, and attend to things that stimulate the imagination. However, only 30% of today's students are I-N people. At least 70% are the direct opposite or E-S personalities. That is, they are linear learners with strong need for structure, they like direct experience, and they like group projects and practical tests. In other words, while we may look inward and use our imagination to find meaning, our students look outward and find meaning through group sharing. Certainly, one style is not "better" than the other, and not all of you fit the I-N category as I do. My point is that we need to be sensitive to the difference so that we can construct assignments and vary our classroom approach so that the learning style preferences of our students are being met--so that they will learn. No where do I see this sensitivity and awareness more important than in the English classroom. And two reasons come to mind: one, many students see English 101 as a requirement to be endured and they would rather be doing something else. Second, we all know that some (not all) students approach literature with apathy, if not downright resentment.

Getting back to our I-N and E-S categories, Introverted teachers, claims Lawrence, are more likely to structure learning activites through the materials

they select for students, while Extraverted teachers are more likely to give students choices about what to study andd how to go about studying it. Intuitive (or N) types tend to emphasize concepts and relationships, while Sensing types tend to emphasize facts, practical information, and concrete skills. Obviously, what we need to do is (1) be aware that our learning styles are not necessarily those of our students and (2) be flexible and give students choices in completing assignments. This is what I believe I stumbled upon a few semesters ago. I will briefly describe the method which I have used in three different types of courses: a required second semester freshman course which integrated composition and literature, a British literature survey, and a sophomore-level introduction to literary genre course.

My assignment is basically the same in all courses: In addition to reading the works, students must write a journal entry about each work before class discussion. Their entries, about 200 words or 15 minutes of focused freewriting, should demonstrate their exploration of an aspect of the work which they find intriguing or confusing or interesting. I encourage them to explore the work in relation to themselves, to search for what I call making the literature part of themselves (we would call it the phenomenological approach). Class discussion is usually lively because they all have something to add since they have thought and written about the work. After each class discussion, they must write another entry of about 200 words in which they either continue to explore their previous line of thinking or in which they react to something said in class. For example, they now may have a better understanding of the text and they can react in a more focused way. Or they may disagree with something said in class, either by a fellow classmate or by me.

At the beginning of the semester, I suggest writing prompts, since most have not previously kept a journal of this type. Usually, however, by the

fourth week of class, they are fairly adept at writing journal entries, so I do not provide prompts unless they ask for them or I conclude from reading their journals (I collect them every four weeks) that they need further guidance. I have also found that the majority of students soon surpass the 200-word requirement. These journal entries achieve several goals: Students are not reading passively; they must focus on one or two important aspects of the work. They come to class armed with something to say about the work, ideas to test against the responses of their peers. Writing journal entries is a comparatively unstressful way of writing about literature because they focus on their personal explorations of the work. Last, journals help them to study for exams and to select topics for their formal papers.

To reinforce this personal and generally non-guided exploration, I use small-group discussions during class, and I think that to be most effective these two methods must be used jointly. Discussions in groups of five to six students force them to become active participants in their own learning process, and also meets their needs for group interaction. The group-appointed leader moderates the discussion, keeping the group on-task. I visit each group, always pulling up a chair to sit alongside them, to be sure that they understand the surface level. Often I give each group a specific task. For example, in a recent discussion of Tennyson's "Ulysses," one group had to decide whether the ending of the poem was pessimistic or optimistic, another had to decide if Ulysses was a hero, while another put the theme of the poem into a contemporary context.

When we reconvene as a large group, encouraging students to participate in class discussion is no longer a problem. While today's students are by and large extraverts who enjoy group work, offering their untested ideas in a large group with the instructor listening (and judging) is intimidating. Once they

feel comfortable in their small groups, they begin to open up in the large one as well. An observer of my classes will see students actively engaged in their own learning, and sometimes the arguments become rather heated. Students like this approach, and I will quote only a couple of the representative comments:

> The discussion groups and journals are both good ideas. Poetry and short stories in other literature-related courses are often viewed as boring because the language and the meaning seems foreign to students. By taking the class out of the formalized setting it encourages us to discuss literature and try to understand it. Sometimes after reading a particular story or poem I am puzzled at its meaning. Then I start to write in my journal and I can see the progress I am making to understand the work.

Another said, "I learned more in this class (sophomore-level) than in English 101 and 102 combined--because of the journals."

By using this method, we merge various skills of communication: (1) independent reading and thinking and writing about ideas presented in literature, (2) sharing of those ideas in small or large groups, (3) the chance to reevaluate those ideas in the after-class entries, and (4) the articulation of those ideas in formal writing assignments, papers or exams. This synthesis is exciting for me as an instructor as I see even normally silent students become engaged in communicating their ideas to others in their small or large groups, and I believe it is exciting for the students as well. The vast majority of my students, be they from the normally grim freshman courses or the more advanced literature courses, comment on evaluations that they enjoy their reading and writing. This method of class discussion allows each student to enhance his or her reading skills, writing skills, and oral communication

skills in an environment shown to be most conducive to their method of learning. Surely that is our primary goal.

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A B S T R A C T

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